

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

This Plan Review and Evaluation Report fulfills a follow-up/evaluation requirement set forth in the Northgate Area Comprehensive Plan (hereafter referred to as the “Northgate Plan”), which required reports on traffic, development activity, and analysis of progress and difficulties in implementation of the Northgate Plan.

This report helps document what did and did not happen since 1993 in relation to the Northgate Plan, analyzes why implementation did or did not work as intended, and recommends strategies that can be pursued in the future to better promote implementation of the Plan. The report is meant to assist and inform future planning and implementation efforts that may be undertaken by several city departments and other agencies.

This executive summary includes: overall conclusions; key recommendations grouped in themes; key findings that support the recommendations; and a brief tabular summary of progress made and challenges in the implementation of the Northgate Plan.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

The Northgate Plan and this evaluation cover a wide range of issues, and many conclusions are possible. The following are a few broad conclusions that can be drawn.

- The Northgate Plan’s vision is challenging and ambitious: to transform an established automobile-oriented commercial center into an area with a finer-grained, denser, pedestrian-oriented character. This vision conveys the concepts of an ideal future condition and a need for long-term change to reach that better condition. The vision was crafted by a cross-section of Northgate residents, property owners and members of the business community. This vision is still relevant and does not need to be revisited at this time.
- The Northgate Plan’s policies, Land Use Code regulations, and City review processes provide a logical framework to regulate future development. However, adjustments to selected portions of the Northgate Overlay District zoning and regulations are recommended to address identified weaknesses and increase the likelihood of development consistent with the Plan’s vision.
- Much of the implementation of the Northgate Plan depends upon new private development, because this is when regulations are applied and improvements required as conditions of approval. The City’s ability to regulate new development is balanced against the rights of individual property owners. The tension between the City’s regulatory authority and property rights constantly influences the City’s planning strategies. Incentive-based approaches, in addition to current regulations, should be considered, to stimulate new private development consistent with the Plan’s vision.

- The Northgate Plan's vision requires time and effort by all parties (owners, businesses, public agencies and residents). The difficult issues of transportation congestion, reorientation of land use patterns, improving pedestrian orientation, funding, and improving quality of life in existing neighborhoods have no easy solutions. Progress will likely be incremental and gradual, with sporadic bursts of development dependent upon economic conditions.
- The City can promote implementation of the Northgate Plan in several ways, such as:
 - conscientious development review and regulatory enforcement processes;
 - comprehensive planning oversight and coordination of complex activities by public agencies and private parties;
 - finding and allocating financial resources for public improvements;
 - providing well-designed public facilities such as libraries and community centers; and
 - assuring that functional and properly sized infrastructure (utilities, roads, sidewalks, etc.) is available.
- The City's approach to encouraging transformative development (denser commercial, mixed use, and residential projects) in the Northgate Urban Center must consider whether a more prescriptive approach or a more permissive, incentive-oriented approach is necessary.
 - A more prescriptive approach would rely more heavily upon regulatory requirements to set higher minimum standards and demand more from future development projects.
 - A more permissive, incentive-oriented approach would try to increase the attractiveness of commercial properties in the core for private redevelopment that would help transform the area's character as preferred by the Northgate Plan.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this analysis can be grouped into themes that describe how Northgate Plan implementation should be improved in the future. The bulleted items below are summarized versions of the recommendations in Chapter 3.

1. **Evaluate and pursue changes to the Land Use Code to better encourage implementation of the Northgate Plan.**

Recommended changes are:

- Revisions to the Land Use Code should be made to accomplish the following objectives:
 - ⇒ **Define conditioning authority for GDPs;**
 - ⇒ **Define major and minor amendment processes for GDPs;**

- ⇒ Clarify time of vesting;
- ⇒ Assign Department of Neighborhoods staff to provide facilitation and guidance on public involvement and advisory committee activities in future GDP processes; and
- ⇒ Clarify relationship of the GDP advisory committee to design review.

Other possible regulatory changes include:

- Amend the Northgate Overlay density limits for mixed use and single-purpose development in neighborhood commercial zones with 30-foot and 40-foot height limits, and lower single-purpose residential density limits to match the densities allowed in other urban villages.

OR

- If recommended after further analysis, amend density limits in Neighborhood Commercial (NC) zones in the Northgate Urban Center with a bonus-oriented system intended to encourage more residential density and mixed use development consistent with the vision of the Northgate Plan.

AND/OR

- Analyze the feasibility and implications of adding minimum density provisions to NC zones in the Northgate Overlay District, to more efficiently use available development capacity in the Urban Center.
- Revisit parking requirements of the Northgate Plan to see if adjustments are advisable to further limit the allowable amount of parking.
- Evaluate text changes to the Land Use Code to promote the effectiveness of the existing Northgate Open Space Fund in-lieu contribution program, so that contributions are more likely to be made.

2. Evaluate and pursue adjustments in specific strategies in the Northgate Plan to increase the likelihood of future implementation.

- With community participation, review the Green Streets designations for 8th and 12th Avenue NE (and other small street segments located in single-family zoned areas) so that funding and design concepts are better understood and more feasible to implement.
- Re-examine the locations of the Major Pedestrian Street and Special Landscaped Arterial designations, to decide if certain street segments should be added to the current designations.
- In 2001-2002, as part of the comprehensive review of the City's current tax exemption program, consider permitting the property tax exemption tool to be used in the Northgate Urban Center, as an incentive to increase affordable housing production.

- Evaluate the feasibility of different financing mechanisms for implementing improvements discussed in the Northgate Plan. Align this evaluation with other funding strategies being developed for other neighborhood plans.
- Do not establish a parking commission at this time.

3. Clarify and correct text and map content in the Northgate Plan and Land Use Code.

- Change Map A in Section 23.71 of the Land Use Code to display the Urban Center boundary rather than the core boundary.
- Correct Figure 4 of the Northgate Plan to clearly show the 1984 Seattle Comprehensive Transportation Plan (SCTP) Key Bicycle Street designations and additional designations that were added by the Northgate Plan.
- Amend the Northgate Plan's text on use of Local Improvement Districts (LIDs) as a financing tool (Implementation Guideline 16.2.A), to improve the clarity of the discussion.
- Correct other typographical errors and mapping inconsistencies in the Northgate Plan.

4. Improve the effectiveness of City administration, planning, and design review functions.

- Monitor and provide recommendations about the residential development capacity of the Northgate Urban Center, consistent with Policy L61 in Seattle's Comprehensive Plan.
- Improve the City's performance in stewardship and implementation of the Northgate Plan. Use the implementation strategies being developed by the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) to implement the Northgate Plan in a manner similar to the other neighborhood plans.
- Analyze the feasibility of reorganizing the Transportation Management Program (TMP) administrative structure, to improve monitoring and enforcement functions and better achieve trip reduction objectives.
- Consider funding additional SEATLAN staffing to address TMP-related duties.
- Use the Department of Design, Construction and Land Use (DCLU) design review process to promote a higher standard of contextually responsive architectural and site design. Continue ongoing program administration improvements to the citywide design review process and continue to train staff, applicants, and Design Review Board members.
- Continue to use DCLU's land use decisionmaking processes to regulate development consistent with the goals and policies of the Northgate Plan. In land

use decisions for future development proposals, evaluate consistency with the policies and implementation guidelines of the Northgate Plan, as adopted into the Land Use Code and SEPA Ordinance.

- Provide resources and support for efforts to develop neighborhood-specific design guidelines or guidance. When adopted by the City, this would be used by the Design Review Board to provide additional neighborhood-specific design guidance.
- The City's work on station area planning for light rail should include an updated economic and market analysis of current conditions driving development decisions in the Northgate core area, and recommendations for possible tools to encourage development that maximizes zoning and is transit-oriented in design.
- DCLU decisions on development proposals in the Northgate Overlay District should more explicitly evaluate the proposals' relationship to additional State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) policies defined in the Northgate Plan, including reduction of pedestrian/vehicular conflicts, maintaining and protecting single-family neighborhoods, protecting local streets, and improving arterial operations and flow.
- Review the Northgate Plan's request for bicycle improvements on 15th Avenue NE and include this project on the Bicycle Needs Inventory map.
- Seattle Public Utilities should continue watershed planning efforts and implement projects to enhance the natural drainage and habitat functions of the Thornton Creek watershed.
- Consult with the City's Neighborhood Development Manager (NDM) for the Northeast Sector on human services and community facilities decisions.
- Continue to regulate transitions as defined in the Northgate Plan and Land Use Code. The City's design review process should also be used to implement the transition policy in the Northgate Plan.

5. Pursue physical improvements and additional facilities/services.

Street Improvements

- Prioritize and seek funding for:
 - ⇒ intersection improvements at 15th Avenue NE/Northgate Way and Pinehurst Way/NE 117th Street (SEATRAN and DON staff should assist citizens in preparing a neighborhood traffic plan and petition for this improvement);
 - ⇒ additional neighborhood traffic controls that are deemed suitable by SEATRAN. Citizens should identify specific locations and desired traffic calming devices for SEATRAN to evaluate.

Pedestrian/Bicycle Improvements

- Prioritize and seek funding for:
 - ⇒ bicycle-oriented improvements such as signage, wide curb lanes or bicycle lanes, in locations where physically feasible and safe;
 - ⇒ pedestrian-oriented street improvements along Green Streets and other locations (depends on feasibility of LID funding strategies or other financing strategies);

Open Space/Recreational Improvements

- Seek opportunities and funding for:
 - ⇒ open space acquisitions and public access improvements to Thornton Creek natural areas, but not a continuous trail through the entire creek corridor.
 - ⇒ additional purchases of property for passive parks, per the Northgate Plan.

Transit-Related Improvements

- Continue to coordinate with the Mall owner and King County to pursue relocation of the park-and-ride capacity from the 5th Avenue NE lot to the Northgate Transit Center vicinity. Also, determine how planning for improvements at the 5th Avenue NE site will occur, assuming that parking is relocated and the 5th Avenue NE parcel is obtained by the City.
- As part of station area planning and subsequent light rail project development, plan for improvements that will facilitate pedestrian and transit access from the neighborhoods, and control traffic/parking impacts on nearby areas, per the Northgate Plan.
- Investigate the feasibility of, and advocate for, future transit service and routing improvements, to provide better transit service to and from surrounding neighborhoods.
- Seek options to continue Metro Route 318 service, which could be canceled due to transit funding cuts.
- Evaluate the feasibility of High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lane improvements on Northgate Way and 1st Avenue NE, as suggested in the Northgate Plan.

Human Services and Public Facilities

- Agencies and City departments providing human service planning and delivery should do neighborhood outreach to businesses and local residents, including consulting with the Neighborhood Development Manager for the Northeast Sector, to better understand neighborhood-specific needs and concerns.

- Agencies and City departments siting capital facilities should do neighborhood outreach to businesses and local residents, including consulting with the Neighborhood Development Manager for the Northeast Sector, to better understand neighborhood-specific needs and concerns.

KEY FINDINGS SUPPORTING KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

Land Use and Housing

- Progress in transforming the Northgate commercial area to fulfill the Northgate Plan's vision has been relatively slow to date. Most newer development in the vicinity has not been transformative in nature, but similar in form to the existing uses, e.g., single-purpose commercial structures.
- Since 1993, the Land Use Code has evolved such that the allowable densities in the Northgate Overlay District no longer offer an incentive for mixed-use development.
 - ⇒ Initially, the mixed-use densities allowed in some Neighborhood Commercial zones as a result of the Northgate Plan were denser than allowed in other portions of the city.
 - ⇒ Later, mixed-use density limits were removed from NC zones in most areas of the city, but not in the Northgate Overlay District. The density is determined by setbacks, height limits and other development standards. The NC zones with 30-foot and 40-foot height limits in the Northgate Overlay District currently have density limits.
- Ongoing and planned new commercial construction will significantly reduce the residential development capacity of the Northgate Urban Center. Enough residential capacity will remain to meet the Urban Center's residential growth target for 2014, but future growth should be monitored so that residential development capacity does not become too constrained. This highlights the City's interest in promoting mixed-use development to best utilize development capacity within the Urban Center.
- The current GDP requirements in the Land Use Code lack specificity in the following areas: no conditioning authority; no process for amending an approved GDP; lack of clarity regarding vesting; and lack of clarity regarding duration of GDP approval. Other aspects of the GDP that are worthy of review in this evaluation include: the decisionmaking authority in the City; current GDP advisory committee rules, and relationship to design review processes.
- The Northgate Plan positively influenced overall urban design quality of recent and planned development. However, the overall aesthetic quality of most newer development was less-than-ideal, due primarily to compromises in architectural quality.

- A conscientious design review process will be critical to achieving high levels of architectural and urban design quality for new development projects.

Transportation

- Average weekday daily and PM peak hour traffic volumes in the Northgate planning area grew in some locations but in others were less than recorded in 1988. The east-west NE 130th Street corridor experienced the greatest percentage growth in average weekday traffic volumes, while the Northgate Way corridor experienced modest traffic growth, and 5th Avenue NE, Roosevelt Way, and 15th Avenue NE had traffic growth at some intersections but not others. “Peak spreading” (congested conditions extending over a longer period of time than in the past) may have occurred, but has not been confirmed.
- The Northgate Plan’s transit objectives were partially achieved, in that new routes were provided, service is more frequent through longer periods of the day and week, and connections to more areas are possible than in 1993. Despite this progress, some of the Northgate Plan’s transit service objectives are not yet met, primarily consisting of bus route changes or increased service that would better connect surrounding neighborhoods to the Northgate Transit Center (e.g., east-west connections).
- Transit providers face major budgeting issues: King County’s projected loss of \$50 million in transit operating budget for the year 2000 may result in worst-case cuts of up to one-third of METRO services (1.1 million hours out of 3.3 million hours of service for 2000-2001). Transit service in Seattle may decline by up to 32 percent (approximately 600,000 hours of service) or even more depending upon County decisions.
- Federal grant funding for Metro Route 318, a shuttle route connecting Bitter Lake senior housing, Northwest Hospital and North Seattle Community College to the Northgate Transit Center, is scheduled to expire in mid-2000. The institutions also contribute partial funding for the route. Further public funding of the relatively low ridership Route 318 would be at odds with the City and Metro’s current funding prioritization approach, which emphasizes saving higher ridership routes first. If continued operation is important to the community, then institutions, businesses and residents need to work with METRO and the City to identify alternative funding approaches.
- Transportation Management Programs (TMPs) do contribute to changes in commuting patterns from single-occupant vehicles to alternative transportation modes, for a portion of the employee population. However:
 - ⇒ the organizational structure of TMP administration (e.g., responsibilities divided between DCLU and SEATRAN) creates a gap between the monitoring and enforcement functions. Very few enforcement actions are taken;

- ⇒ SEATTRAN has not had adequate funding and staffing for the TMP-related functions it provides. Staffing and funding limitations constrain the ability to effectively monitor TMP performance; and,
- ⇒ TMP administration could benefit from additional information technology to effectively manage TMP-related information and aid in monitoring functions.
- SEATTRAN has not included in its Bicycle Needs Inventory map the Northgate Plan's request for bicycle-related improvements on 15th Avenue NE. SEATTRAN has not considered funding for these improvements.

Open Space

- The Northgate Plan's Green Streets on street segments within single-family zones (8th and 12th Avenues NE) are unlikely to be implemented as currently described in the Northgate Plan.
 - ⇒ New substantial development (e.g., residential or commercial growth exceeding 4,000 square feet in gross floor area), that could be required to provide frontage improvements, is unlikely to occur in the single-family areas.
 - ⇒ Other Green Streets funding strategies have not generated funds. An Open Space Fund did not receive any contributions (see below). No LIDs were formed.
- The Northgate Plan's Open Space Fund allowing voluntary cash contributions in-lieu of on-site open space for new developments has not been utilized by developers. This may be due to the voluntary nature of the strategy, the ability to provide relatively small amounts of on-site open space to satisfy requirements, and/or the complexity of interpreting the Land Use Code.
- The City of Seattle, King County and the Mall owners have discussed the potential for City acquisition of the 5th Avenue NE site for open space and replacement of the park-and-ride spaces through a shared parking agreement with the Northgate Mall. All parties are still considering this possibility, pending resolution of GDP appeals. After the GDP appeals are resolved, the park site could be acquired and redeveloped within roughly 5-7 years, if approved by the Seattle and King County Councils.

Drainage

- The City is investing considerable effort and resources in planning and improvement projects related to the Thornton Creek watershed. Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) has spent over \$9 million in the Thornton Creek watershed on planning and constructing drainage improvements since 1995, and committed over \$5 million to creek restoration work in the next few years, in addition to flood prevention projects.
- The City's current stormwater, grading and drainage control requirements are comparable to or stronger than the requirements discussed in the Northgate Plan. The current codes require new development to provide drainage control and treatment systems that are believed to adequately protect downstream habitat and natural drainage capabilities.

- The Northgate Plan’s drainage policy and implementation guideline text does not state that new segments of Thornton Creek should be daylighted. The policy text is oriented to restoration/enhancement of the habitat and drainage values of existing natural creek segments. The implementation guidelines address on-site drainage systems and control of construction-related impacts, which are preventive measures that help avoid or minimize impacts of new development on natural creek segments.

Human Services and Community Facilities

- Funding was approved by voters for a new library and a new community center, both of which will accommodate social, cultural and recreational opportunities.

Financing

- SEPA authority was used to condition new development, but other strategies for financing improvements have not been used since adoption of the Northgate Plan. Local Improvement Districts (LIDs) are difficult to achieve because of the high cost of designing/constructing improvements, the difficulty in securing approval and private funds from adjacent property owners, and the difficulty in securing public funds. Re-establishing a City Street Fund is recommended, to provide public funds for the City’s portion of LID improvement costs.

Planning Horizon

The Northgate Area Comprehensive Plan is a long-range plan meant to “*manage growth so that it can provide an opportunity for changing the character of the commercial core while enhancing the surrounding single family neighborhoods. It guides public and private investments regarding future land use, transportation and open space in the Northgate area.*” [page 1]. The Northgate Plan indicated no firm endpoint to its planning period, but noted that it “*addresses the period between 1992 and the initial operations of a regional high capacity transit system (after year 2002)*” [page 1]. The best estimate of initial operations of the Sound Transit LINK light rail system at Northgate is approximately 2008. If this is assumed as the endpoint of the Northgate Plan’s planning period (“horizon”), the Plan will address 15 years (1993-2008). The other recently-completed neighborhood plans have similar long-range planning horizons.

The Northgate Plan is oriented to shaping changes in character through new growth (residential, commercial and institutional) and new public investments. The process of altering an area’s character is a long-term process, particularly when the pace of new commercial and residential development is relatively slow, as has occurred in the Northgate area. The slower pace of development has provided only limited opportunities to obtain street and sidewalk improvements through conditioning of new projects.

Estimations of progress toward implementation of the Northgate Plan should bear in mind that we are only approximately 7 years into the planning period. Over the next 10-15 years, the Northgate Urban Center may experience faster-paced and more transformative growth depending upon factors such as the regional economy, real estate market, housing preferences, land use regulations, and presence of a light rail system.

Table 1-1 summarizes progress made and challenges in implementation of the Northgate Plan.

Table 1-1
Progress Made and Challenges in Plan Implementation

Progress Made Toward Implementation	Implementation Challenges
<p>Land Use and Housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rezones from C to NC reoriented zoning to promote street orientation and mixed-use development. • Adoption of Overlay District regulations, including General Development Plan (GDP) regulations, and additional transition requirements. • DCLU review of several development projects, including a GDP for the Northgate Mall. • Review according to Overlay District regulations and design review process positively influenced aesthetic character and site planning of new development. • Nearly 600 units of additional housing were provided in the planning area since Northgate Plan adoption, of which 80% were multifamily units (including senior assisted living units). <p>Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TMPs have been required as discussed in the Northgate Plan, and do contribute to some reduction in vehicle trips. • Transit service expanded in the planning area, meeting or exceeding several transit requests in the Northgate Plan. • Construction of an I-5 on-ramp and changes to the intersection of Northgate Way/1st Ave. NE aided in traffic flow. • Other transportation improvements include: a new street under construction at NE 112th St. between 3rd and 5th Aves. NE; recent signalization at 5th Ave. NE/NE 92nd St.; and planned left turn pockets at NE 130th St./1st Ave. NE 	<p>Land Use and Housing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Density limits in Northgate Overlay District no longer are an incentive for mixed-use development. • Only limited mixed-use development occurred; most development in core was single-purpose commercial uses. • Recent and planned development will reduce residential development capacity in the Urban Center. • Compromises in architectural quality and site planning reduced the overall urban design quality of some commercial development. <p>Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to monitor and enforce TMPs is limited due to staffing constraints. • Not all of the transit requests were met, primarily addressing east-west service. • Additional HOV lane concepts not studied yet. • King County METRO faces major funding cuts affecting entire bus system, due to I-695-related State funding issues.

Table 1.1 (continued)

Progress Made Toward Implementation	Implementation Challenges
<p>Transportation (continued)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metro, Northwest Hospital and NSCC funded Metro shuttle bus Route 318, connecting to the Transit Center. • Planning and coordination has occurred between SPO, King County and the Mall owners in efforts to relocate park-and-ride capacity to the Northgate Transit Center, and free up the 5th Avenue NE park-and-ride for future development of a park. • Development to date provided approximately 425 linear feet of sidewalk improvements on Major Pedestrian Streets, and planned development (Touchstone, Mall GDP) will provide improvements on another 2,800 linear feet of Major Pedestrian Streets. This will address approximately 40% of the street frontage designated as Major Pedestrian Streets. • In most locations, daily and peak hour traffic did not grow as much as was projected by past studies. • Some additional neighborhood traffic controls, and a few pedestrian crossings were provided since adoption of the Northgate Plan. • Decisions on the Mall GDP and Touchstone projects included required intersection improvements as mitigation for projected traffic impacts. • City staff will engage in station area planning in Northgate in 2000. <p>Open Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open space with play equipment and picnic tables next to the Northgate Way QFC and Victory Creek was secured through a Property Use and Development Agreement. • Coordination between the City, King County, and the Mall owner has occurred related to potential future acquisition of the 5th Avenue Park-and-Ride lot for future public uses. This is dependent upon development of the Mall's South Lot. 	<p>Transportation (continued)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for Route 318 threatened by expiration of a federal grant and I-695-related budget issues. • Relocation of 5th Avenue NE park-and-ride capacity, and future park development not yet assured, until Mall GDP appeals are resolved. • The 425 linear feet of sidewalk improvements to date addressed only about 5% of Major Pedestrian Street frontage. • Curb cuts on Major Pedestrian Streets were allowed in three locations, following unsuccessful appeals to the Hearing Examiner. • Some locations discussed in the Northgate Plan were not provided intersection improvements. • Some locations discussed in the Northgate Plan were not provided pedestrian crossing improvements. • Funding for construction of a light rail system reaching Northgate has not yet been secured. <p>Open Space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding has not been secured for other passive park locations identified in the Northgate Plan. • Green Streets improvements in single-family areas (e.g., 8th and 12th Aves. NE) are unlikely to be implemented, because the substantial new development that would provide the improvements is unlikely to ever occur along these streets.

Table 1.1 (continued)

Progress Made Toward Implementation	Implementation Challenges
<p>Drainage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPU watershed studies and planned improvement projects will improve drainage and habitat conditions in the Thornton Creek watershed. • The Mall GDP and other new developments will be required to provide adequate drainage controls to avoid or limit drainage impacts on natural drainage systems. <p>Human Services and Community Facilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The planned new library and community center will provide new facilities requested in the Northgate Plan. • New human services include a Meadowbrook Family Support Center (1997), and a New Beginnings women's shelter (1997). <p>Financing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City used SEPA authority for conditioning new Northgate projects in a manner generally similar to its use of authority elsewhere in the City. 	<p>Human Services and Community Facilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding limitations usually restrict service providers from providing the full amount and type of human services that are needed by the community. <p>Financing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The methods for financing improvements discussed in the Plan were not utilized, and availability of public funding for most improvements is limited.